

The role of quality in health services

(Rola jakości w usługach zdrowotnych)

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Abstract – Introduction. Quality in the provision of health services is very important, because continuous improvement in quality is now a prerequisite for the survival of any business. The demand for medical services in Poland is constantly increasing, and as a result competition on the market is intensifying, the number of hospitals and medical facilities providing services is increasing. Society has the opportunity to choose a medical facility and in doing so, it is guided by the quality of services in the facility.

The aim of the work was to discuss the importance of quality in health services.

Selection of material. The search was carried out in the Scopus database for the period 2004-2020 in the field of Polish bibliography, using the terms *meaning quality in health services*. From the literature found in the Google Scholar database, studies were selected which, in the opinion of the authors, would be most useful in the preparation of this study.

Conclusions. The process of raising quality is a permanent element of people responsible for health care, and one of the most important stages of raising this quality is to develop appropriate standards of conduct. The higher quality of the services offered is the basic aim of the transformations which are currently taking place in medical care institutions in our country. Quality assurance is a planned process which is based on an assessment of the care currently provided and on taking action to constantly improve the standard of patient care.

Key words - the importance of quality in health services.

Streszczenie – Wstęp. Jakość w świadczeniu usług zdrowotnych ma bardzo duże znaczenie, ponieważ stałe ulepszanie jakości jest obecnie warunkiem koniecznym do przetrwania każdego przedsiębiorstwa. Zapotrzebowanie na usługi medyczne w Polsce ciągle wzrasta, a w związku z tym nasila się konkurencja na rynku, wzrasta liczba szpitali oraz placówek medycznych świadczących usługi. Społeczeństwo ma możliwość wyboru placówki medycznej i czyniąc to kieruje się jakością usług w danej placówce.

Cel pracy. Celem pracy było omówienie znaczenia jakości w usługach zdrowotnych.

Dobór materiału. Poszukiwania przeprowadzono w bazie Scopus za okres 2004-2020 w zakresie bibliografii polskiej, używając pojęć *znaczenie jakości w usługach zdrowotnych*. Ze znalezionego w bazie Google Scholar piśmiennictwa wyselekc

jonowano opracowania, które zdaniem autorów byłyby najbardziej użyteczne w przygotowaniu niniejszego opracowania.

Wnioski. Proces podnoszenia jakości jest stałym elementem działania ludzi odpowiedzialnych za ochronę zdrowia, a jednym z najważniejszych etapów podnoszenia tej jakości jest opracowanie odpowiednich standardów postępowania. Wyższa jakość oferowanych usług jest podstawowym celem przekształceń, jakie w obecnej chwili zachodzą w instytucjach opieki medycznej w naszym kraju. Zapewnienie jakości to zaplanowany proces, który opiera się na ocenie aktualnie sprawowanej opieki oraz na podejmowaniu działania mającego na celu stałą poprawę standardu opieki nad pacjentem.

Słowa kluczowe – znaczenie jakości w usługach zdrowotnych.

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I. DEFINITION OF QUALITY IN HEALTH SERVICES

The term 'quality' is extremely difficult to define. It is an ambiguous concept known since ancient times. The word quality was introduced to philosophy by Plato, who described it as a degree of perfection. Quality is understood as a set of characteristics of a product or service, which is associated with its ability to meet specific needs and expectations of the customer. Quality of health care also means the degree to which health services covering individuals, as well as entire populations, increase the probability of achieving the desired health effects and demonstrate compliance with current professional knowledge"[1-3].

The term "quality" is also commonly used in everyday life. However, it is understood differently as the quality of material goods, and differently as the quality of services or quality of life.

According to the dictionary of the Polish language, quality is a property, genus, species, a set of characteristics which determine that an object is this and not another [4]. The definition of medical service quality has evolved over the centuries.

One of the oldest documents defining the quality of medical service is the Hammurabi Code (approx. 1792-1750 B.C.) [5].

Florence Hightingale was also interested in the quality of health services, who already in 1859 compared the mortality in the army with the number of deaths among civilians [6].

In health care, it is emphasised that 'quality' is the extent to which any service provided to a patient, delivered according to the state of the art, increases the likelihood of obtaining the desired outcome of the care and reduces the likelihood of adverse outcomes.

In 1984, Maxwell pointed out that quality of care is an interrelated element such as: efficiency, effectiveness and efficiency, equity, accessibility, acceptance, relevance to needs [7].

Moss, on the other hand, believes that quality is a set of characteristics of services that contribute to meeting customer needs [8].

Donabedian defines quality of health care as a type of care that maximises the well-being of the patient, taking into account the balance of expected benefits and losses that accompany the care process [9]. Donabedian viewed quality through the prism of accessibility, continuity, coordination and effectiveness [10].

According to the International Organization for Standardization in ISO 8402, quality is the whole of the characteristics of a facility that are related to its ability to meet expected needs [11].

Nowadays, one of the most frequently quoted definitions of the quality of health services is the one developed by the American Medical Institute, according to which the quality is the extent to which the health services provided to individuals and populations increase the probability of obtaining a positive health effect and are in accordance with professional current knowledge [12].

According to the American Association for Quality Control, quality is the sum of the characteristics of a product and service that determines the ability of a product to meet specific needs [13].

In conclusion, the common denominator of these definitions is that quality is the ability to meet the expectations of customers.

II. THE IMPORTANCE OF QUALITY IN HEALTH SERVICES

Quality in the provision of health services is very important, because continuous improvement in quality is now a prerequisite for the survival of any business. The demand for medical services in Poland is constantly increasing, and as a result competition on the market is intensifying, the number of hospitals and medical facilities providing services is increasing. Society has the opportunity to choose a medical facility and in doing so, it is guided by the quality of services in the facility.

According to a CBOS survey in 2016, the vast majority of Poles are public health service patients. According to a survey conducted in 2016, most people were treated in a 'mixed' way, i.e. they used both the services available under the National Health Fund and those paid for privately. 37% of people used only public health services and only 7% were treated exclusively 'privately' [14].

Ensuring an appropriate level of quality of health services therefore requires action at several levels. Improving quality requires a comprehensive approach and the creation of standards in a healthcare institution. Quality improvement consists in defining new patients' expectations and organising the institution's activities in such a way as to meet the resulting requirements. The model of quality creation is therefore dynamic and the improvement process never ends.

Quality improvement is [7]:

- production of improved health services and greater satisfaction of their recipients under the conditions imposed by the technology in use,
- consumer conditions and resources.

The process of raising quality is, therefore, a permanent element in the activities of people responsible for health care, and one of the most important stages of raising this quality is to develop appropriate standards of conduct. The higher quality of the services offered is the basic aim of the transformations currently taking place in medical care institutions in our country [15]. Quality assurance is a planned process, which is based on the assessment of the currently performed care and on taking action to continuously improve the standard of patient care. Two quality assurance systems are mentioned[16]:

- external - consisting of controlling and searching for errors in the structure, process and results of the plant.
- Internal - these are ways and means that lead to quality and are taken in a healthcare facility.

The quality of services provided by medical care institutions is analysed in several areas, the improvement of which satisfies the expectations of the recipients.

These include [17]:

1. The strictly medical service sphere, which is directly related to the service provided, the examination or treatment carried out.
2. Information sphere - related to the way and form of information provided to a patient about his/her condition, illness or prognosis.
3. The technical sphere, which includes equipment, the technical condition of the diagnostic equipment used.
4. The management and economic-administrative sphere, which includes processes and procedures according to which the service is provided.

In turn, quality in relation to medical services is divided into three categories [18]:

1. The quality of the structure - which includes the education and number of staff, medical equipment, premises and organisation infrastructure. This is an essential element in achieving high quality services.
2. Quality of the process - refers to activities performed to improve the patient's health. It is based on taking care of the course of treatment.

3. The quality of the outcome is based on indicators such as mortality, morbidity, number of complications and changes in the quality of life of the patient.

High quality of provided services is achieved by understanding and meeting patients' expectations and requirements. The basic determinant of the success of a medical facility is the satisfaction of the patient, which results from meeting the need or solving a problem [19].

In the dictionary of the Polish language, Karłowicz defines satisfaction as the satisfaction with meeting certain expectations [20].

The Patient Satisfaction Survey gives an opportunity to probe what the providers think about the services offered. Nowadays, patients are more and more often guided by information contained on the Internet when choosing an institution, they look for sources of such information, and due to the extent and ease of obtaining data, the popularity of this source is growing. The popularity of this information channel makes the profile of a specialist on the Internet translate into a perception in real life [21].

The benefits of patient satisfaction studies include [22]:

- acquiring a marketing tool,
- Improving patient safety,
- the interpretation of the factors which provide evidence of a higher quality of medical services in various healthcare institutions.

The examination of service quality is very complicated because it is subjective. Each person, due to different expectations, needs or preferences, can evaluate the quality level in a different way [23]. The level of patient satisfaction therefore reflects the extent to which the total product offered by the facility meets customer requirements [24].

According to the World Health Organisation, quality is a priority in health care and sets a goal that medical facilities should strive for to satisfy the customer [25]. According to the documentation of the World Health Organisation, health care institutions have a duty to strive for patient satisfaction and improvement of the quality of services provided [26].

According to Tomasik *et al.* most doctors are of the opinion that in order to ensure a high level of service, it is essential to improve one's own knowledge and skills and to recover the patient as quickly as possible [27].

Rogozński claims that in the process of service provision, the involvement of employees is also important and the way they behave influences the quality of work and the image of the organisation [28].

In medicine, the pursuit of the highest quality of health services has become a tradition, but, according to statistics

on the work of medical courts, there is a constant increase in dissatisfied patients.

Statistical data show that more and more Poles feel that they are victims of medical error [22]. A correctly created image of the facility has an impact on its competitive position.

This image translates into many benefits [29]:

- distinction among competing care facilities,
- to fix a positive image in the eyes of patients,
- a higher level of employee satisfaction,
- the ease of gaining new customers.

The aim of improving quality is to ensure the efficient and effective functioning of the health system. Patients should be satisfied with the service they receive, employees should be satisfied with their work, and the market share of the service provider should continue to grow. It is important to be aware of the role that quality plays for the patient and to understand the importance of quality in health services.

The entities interested in service quality are [30]:

- a patient who wants to get a good quality service at a price that will make him or her use the services of the establishment again,
- healthcare staff who are directly involved in quality,
- director/manager - responsible for implementing the quality system,
- quality experts - interested in reducing costs,
- the state, the local government, which, as the founding body, is responsible for coordinating health policy,
- The payer, that is to say, the Ministry of Health, local government or any other entity which, when buying medical services, should have a specific mechanism for financing services in a contract,
- suppliers of apparatus, equipment from which a quality certificate is required.

In conclusion, both managers and health professionals should be aware of the role of quality in the services provided by medical facilities. The assessment of quality is also influenced by the environment of service provision, i.e. the appearance and equipment of the room, cleanliness, rules of visiting patients [31-34].

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